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Report of the International Labour Organization

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the International Labour Organization on updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations and plans to implement the updated classification. The report is submitted to the Commission for information. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2008/1.

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Report of the International Labour Organization on the updated International Standard Classification of Occupations

I. Recommendation of the Statistical Commission on the International Standard Classification of Occupations

1. In discussing the report provided by the International Labour Office on progress in updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) (E/CN.3/2007/11), the Statistical Commission at its thirty-eighth session:[1]

(a) Agreed with the draft structure of the Classification as a suitable standard for internationally comparable statistics;

(b) Noted that draft definitions of the proposed categories of the Classification and language versions of the Classification were important prerequisites for its successful implementation;

(c) Took note of the forthcoming steps to be taken in the formal process to approve the Classification;

(d) Requested the International Labour Office to report to the Commission in 2008.

II. Status of the work on updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations

A. Background

2. Work on updating ISCO was mandated in a resolution of the seventeenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2003. In that resolution, endorsed by the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in March 2004, ILO was requested to update ISCO by late 2007 and to convene a meeting of experts to adopt the classification and make appropriate recommendations to the Governing Body.

3. The work was scheduled for completion to allow sufficient time for the updated classification, or national adaptations of it, to be available for use in the 2010 round of national population censuses. The request that the ILO timetable for the revision of ISCO meet the needs of the next census round was made at the thirty-fourth session of the Statistical Commission, in March 2003.[2] At the thirty-fifth session of the Commission, held in March 2004, ILO made a commitment to complete the work by 2007, with the expectation that the updated classification would be presented to the Commission at its meeting in March 2008.[3]

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[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2007, Supplement No. 4* (E/2007/24), chap. I.B., decision 38/108.

[2] Ibid., *2003, Supplement No. 4* (E/2003/24), chap. V. para. 2 (i).

[3] Ibid., *2004, Supplement No. 4 and corrigendum* (E/2004/24 and Corr.1), chap. V, para. 4 (h).

4. A meeting of experts on labour statistics on updating ISCO was duly convened by the ILO Governing Body from 3 to 6 December 2007. The deliberations of the experts were based on a report prepared by ILO in its working languages English, French and Spanish.[4] The experts evaluated an updated classification structure and made a small number of amendments to it, then adopted a draft resolution endorsing the classification structure, which was annexed to the draft resolution.

5. The report of the meeting of experts, including the draft resolution and the classification structure, was made available in English, French and Spanish on the ILO website before the end of 2007. The updated classification is known as the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08). It will be available to the Commission at its thirty-ninth session as a background document.

6. The main purposes and uses of ISCO are to provide:

(a) A basis for the international reporting, comparison and exchange of statistical and administrative data about occupations;

(b) A model for the development of national and regional classifications of occupations;

(c) A system that can be used directly in countries that have not developed their own national classifications.

7. Occupational classifications are used in national contexts for the collection and dissemination of statistics from population censuses, household surveys, employer surveys and other sources. They are also used by Governments and companies in such activities as matching job seekers with job vacancies, educational planning, reporting of industrial accidents, administration of workers compensation and the management of employment-related migration. Globalization of the labour market is increasing the demand for internationally comparable occupational information for both statistical and administrative purposes, and highlights the need for a robust and contemporary framework for the reporting and exchange of information about occupations.

B. Work undertaken by the International Labour Organization

8. In updating ISCO, ILO consulted as widely as possible with stakeholders and interested parties. This was done mainly by means of two questionnaires that were sent to all countries through their labour ministries, national statistical institutes, employment services, vocational training institutes and employers' and workers' organizations and by circulating successive drafts of the updated classification structure for comment. ILO also consulted with a range of specialized agencies and stakeholders with an interest in those occupational groups where the most updating was needed.

9. An important element in the success of the work was the establishment of a Technical Expert Group for updating ISCO to provide ILO with advice on and assistance in the updating work. The group is made up of national experts in occupational classification from all regions of the world, as well as experts from

[4] Documentation for the meeting of experts is available at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/techmeet/index.htm.

relevant international agencies. It has met five times between November 2005 and December 2007 and conducts its business electronically between sessions.

10. The work undertaken by ILO also benefited strongly from its consultations with and the valuable advice provided by the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications. Reports on progress and on draft classification structures were presented and discussed at the meetings of the group held in June 2005 and April 2007.

11. On the basis of suggestions made by the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications and the Technical Expert Group for updating ISCO, as well as taking into consideration the comments received from many other sources, ILO made a number of changes in the draft classification structure provided to the Commission for comment in February 2007. A final draft was circulated to the Technical Expert Group members and other experts in July 2007 and released in September 2007 as part of the report for the meeting of experts.[4]

12. Major issues that were addressed in the updating work include:

(a) The impact of information and communications technology on the occupational structure of the labour market;

(b) The need for improved coverage of health occupations;

(c) User requests for more detail in agricultural, forestry and fishery occupations;

(d) The need to improve the groupings for managerial occupations;

(e) Concerns that ISCO-88 is very detailed for some technical and manufacturing occupations but has much less detail, especially at intermediate levels of aggregation, for clerical and service-related occupations where a large percentage of persons employed are female;

(f) Concerns about the existence of parallel groups at different skill levels for occupations that involve the performance of similar or identical tasks;

(g) The need for improved coverage of occupations that predominate in the informal sector and that have lower skill requirements;

(h) The need to refresh and update definitions of all categories;

(i) The need for the ISCO index to be improved and updated.

C. Main changes in the Classification

13. Although the conceptual model underpinning ISCO-08 remains essentially the same as that used in ISCO-88, there have been some changes in the way the model is used to design the classification. The most notable change is that, since the nature of the work performed has been given more emphasis than the formal education and training required in determining the skill level of an occupation, there is no need for parallel groups in different major groups to allow for cases where the educational and training requirements for a particular occupational group differ from one country to the next.

14. Wherever possible, efforts have been made to ensure that the level of detail provided is appropriate and useful considering the main purposes of an international classification. Given the nature of the occupational distribution of the labour market at the international level, however, and the variety of uses of ISCO, the issues of the sizes of groups and differing levels of detail in different parts of the classification were seen as important, but not overriding, considerations.

15. In some cases there were concerns that it was not feasible to make distinctions between certain categories in ISCO-88 on a consistent basis internationally, especially considering the kind of data that it is possible to collect in a census or in surveys. In such cases as the treatment of managerial occupations in agriculture, adjustments have been made that aim to improve international comparability and consistency of reporting.

16. Some of the more significant changes are summarized below:

(a) The sections of the classification dealing with managerial occupations have been reorganized so as to overcome problems with the distinction between corporate managers and general managers experienced by users of ISCO-88;

(b) Occupations associated with information and communications technology have been updated and expanded, allowing for the identification of professional and associate professional occupations in this field at the second level of the classification;

(c) There is improved coverage of health services occupations, providing sufficient detail to allow ISCO-08 to be used as the basis for the international reporting of data on the health workforce to the World Health Organization and other international and intergovernmental organizations;

(d) The section of the classification dealing with clerical support workers has been reorganized to reflect the increasing impact of information and communications technology on the organization of clerical work and to provide more meaningful detail for occupations in which a large number of women are employed;

(e) The aggregate groupings for sales and service workers have been reorganized and include new groups at the second level of the classification for personal service, personal care and protective services workers;

(f) There is more detail and greater clarity in the treatment of some occupational groups involved in agriculture, and provision is made to allow separate identification at the second level of the classification of skilled agricultural workers apart from forestry, fishery and hunting workers;

(g) More detailed categories are available for occupations involved in the provision of information and services to clients, including those related to tourism;

(h) The groups for plant and machine operators have been rationalized in response to concerns that this part of ISCO-88 was excessively detailed and out of date in some areas;

(i) There is extended coverage of occupations that are significant in informal employment and an associated increase in the number of sub-major groups in ISCO major group 9, Elementary occupations;

(j) Thematic (or alternative) groupings will be provided primarily on the basis of the goods or services produced, independent of skill level.

D. Planned future work

17. ILO will provide support for implementation of the updated ISCO from 2008 in order to ensure that ISCO-08, or national adaptations of it, can be used in the round of national population censuses to be conducted beginning in 2010.

18. Those plans include the publication of ISCO-08 in book form in English, French and Spanish and its release in electronic form on the ILO website; preparation of a manual and training material on how to adapt the updated classification for use in national and regional settings; provision of training on a regional basis through a series of regional workshops; provision of technical assistance and advice directly to countries; and assistance with and review of national classification/ISCO-08 correspondence tables. The exact timing of these activities will be dependent on resource availability.

19. Explanatory material describing the conceptual framework of the classification, definitions of categories, an updated index and an ISCO-88/ISCO-08 correspondence table have been developed in draft form as part of the development work. They will be finalized as soon as possible, in close consultation with the Technical Expert Group for updating ISCO, and will be included in the publication as well as on the ILO website.

20. The final draft definitions will be loaded to the ILO website progressively for comment before they are finalized in English. French and Spanish versions will be available once translations are completed.

21. The existing ISCO-88 index in English has been mapped to the final draft classification structure as part of the process of finalizing the structure. A number of redundant entries have been removed and commonly used terms that were not included have been added, including cases where there are new titles for new and emerging occupations. Once the index has been adjusted to reflect the final changes made in the classification structure at the meeting of experts, members of the Technical Expert Group for updating ISCO will be invited to suggest additional new index entries. It is hoped that as a result, the index will be as up to date and comprehensive as possible and that it will serve as a useful model for the development of national occupational coding indexes. A similar exercise will be conducted for the French and Spanish versions.

22. It is intended that the Technical Expert Group for updating ISCO will continue to function and will provide advice to ILO on issues associated with the implementation of ISCO and on the need for further updates or revisions, as well as serving as a focal point for international discussion on issues associated with occupational classification.

23. **The Statistical Commission may wish to take note of the report of the International Labour Organization, in particular:**

(a) **The conduct of the work undertaken to complete the development of ISCO-08;**

(b) The structure of ISCO-08 (provided to the Commission for information as a background document) endorsed in December 2007 by the meeting of experts and its suitability for use as a model for the development of national classifications and as the basis for the provision of internationally comparable statistics;

(c) That ILO plans to support implementation of ISCO-08 in national and regional statistical activities.